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Appleby Archaeology Group

The Appleby Archaeology Group enjoyed an interesting talk on Field Names and Shapes at their February meeting.

Mary Atkin of Levens began with a number of field names such as Misery Field, Purgatory Field, Dear Bought, names given to fields which were unproductive. Kiss Arse (1770) was the name of a field on a very steep slope. Did someone fall on their backside? Another was Tyche Yng, an earlier name (1538), and possibly meaning a small field. The spelling was often inconsistent as names would have been transcribed to early maps from the spoken word.

She explained how by looking at field shapes, their locations and names it is possible to understand how land was used in the past. References to Appleby and Kentmere were used as illustrations.

Narrow strip fields with gently curving boundaries are indicative of medieval arable use. Enclosures destroyed the strips, particularly the land enclosures following an Act of Parliament, and the fields became larger and rectilinear. The gently curving boundaries are the result of the ploughing techniques of the time. Lanes and hedgerows may show this curve. Wynd was the command

to the oxen to turn at the headland and this word is found in street names such as High Wiend in Appleby.

Other evidence of cultivation is seen in ridge and furrow patterns. Ploughing techniques achieved a mound or ridge 15-18 feet wide with furrows on either side to provide drainage and sometimes boundary marks. These features are often most obvious after light snow when the snow fills the furrow. A lovely slide was shown of buttercups delineating the ridges in a field at Hartsop. The distance between the furrows depended on ^{the} length of the goad used for urging on the oxen, hence the old measurement of rod, perch or pole.

New Towns of the Middle Ages were then described. Appleby, planned around 1110-1120, Warkworth and Ludlow are examples of new towns built to plan on arable strips. Features included a castle and a church at either end, a wide street for a market, (Boroughgate in Appleby) with burgage plots and lanes leading off following the strip field pattern.

The people's needs whether of town or hamlet were met from the adjacent land. Essential requirements would be arable areas for food crops and hay, pasture for grazing, woodland, turbaries for peat and turf and bracken for thatch and bedding. The different areas may be identified by studying the field patterns and names.

A number of names may refer to the same type of land and these vary from one locality to another. Examples used in Cumbrian upland dales were discussed. Low lying meadow may be indicated by ing, dale, fit and moss. Moving uphill to arable land terms include bank, rig and hagg. Some of the words used to describe woodland are coppice, middling, stubbing and thwaite and for pasture, grassing and park. The top moor might be named fell, common, or if there was turbary, moss.

Slides showing views and maps of Kentmere were used to illustrate many of the names and features. An interesting feature that was easily seen from the slides was a number of funnel shaped pathways widening as they reached the pasture. This shape would have helped in gathering in the stock when the animals were driven back down from the pasture.

Mary Atkin concluded her enjoyable and informative talk by citing several cases where there had been disputes over land usage and ownership.

The next talk to the group will be on Tuesday May 1st at Appleby Grammar School at 7pm when Jamie Quartermain will speak on Bronze Age Upland Landscapes.